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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issue of low interest and involvement in teaching careers by students of color. The study discussed in the paper was designed to consider the following general supposition: teacher education programs, as they have traditionally selected, trained, and supported teachers, no longer suffice for the needs of today's multicultural and urban classrooms either in the diversity of the teaching force or in the preparation of all teachers. The perceptions of minority teachers on this supposition were explored through interviews with teachers of color (N=114) in three urban communities: Long Beach (California), Cincinnati (Ohio), and Seattle (Washington). The teachers of color identified their sources of inspiration for choosing to teach and suggested personal characteristics necessary in an effective teacher in today's multicultural classrooms. Information provided by the interviews can be placed in three categories developed from an extensive review of the literature: educational experience, cultural and community concerns, and social and economic obstacles. Informants' suggestions formed the basis for policy recommendations, including a model teacher education program which addresses diversity. (Contains 20 references.) (LL)

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WHY STUDENTS OF COLOR ARE NOT ENTERING THE FIELD OF TEACHING: REFLECTIONS FROM MINORITY TEACHERS

A Paper presented at the Teaching for Diversity Conference

February 1993, Charleston, South Carolina

by

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DR. J.B. Gordon

Why Students of Color Are Not Entering the Field of Teaching: Reflections from Minority Teachers

Abstract

The study was designed to explore the following general supposition: teacher education programs, as they have traditionally selected, trained, and supported teachers, no longer suffice for the needs of today's multicultural classrooms either in the diversity of the teaching force or in the preparation of all teachers. The perceptions of minority teachers on this supposition were explored through interviewing one hundred and fourteen teachers of color in three urban communities: Long Beach, California, Cincinnati, Ohio, and Seattle, Washington. In addition, the teachers of color identified their sources of inspiration for choosing to teach and suggested personal characteristics necessary for an effective teacher in today's multicultural classrooms. Informants' suggestions formed the basis for policy recommendations, including a model teacher education program which addresses diversity.

Introduction

The present research provides another avenue for exploring the issue of low interest and involvement in teaching careers by students of color. The voices of teachers of color who have traveled the path and continue their sojourn in urban classrooms make clear that a great deal more must be discussed and understood if public school teaching will ever attract students of color. The informants' responses provide us not only with insight into the impediments that people of color face in their reach for a career in teaching but also with recommendations to improve the likelihood that students of color might select teaching as a career choice. The popular literature and jargon of the media have led us to believe that the cause of the shortage of "minority" teachers is low pay (Robinson, 1981; Dupre, 1986). As demonstrated in this research, low pay is but one of many causes for students of color not selecting teaching; and, as several of the informants stated, even if the pay were increased, the situation would not change. There are far more serious and more complex issues to address.

This research was designed to explore the following general supposition: Teacher education programs as they have traditionally selected, trained, and supported teachers no longer suffice for the needs of today's multicultural and urban classrooms either in the

diversity of the teaching force or in the preparation of all teachers (Goodlad, 1990; Metz, 1990; Apple, 1986; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1990; Yee, 1990; Spindler, 1987; Lomotey, 1990; Weiler, 1988; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). From this supposition, four questions guided the process of interviewing one hundred and fourteen teachers of color in three urban communities across America: Long Beach, California, Cincinnati, Ohio, and Seattle, Washington. The research questions were as follows:

One: What distinct obstacles do students of color face in their reach for a career in teaching?

Two: Would more people of color be attracted to, and remain in, teaching if they perceived their training and their professional career as a teacher relevant to the needs of their community?

Three: What recruitment strategies are required to attract students of color into the field of teaching? and,

Four: What improvements are needed in teacher education programs to better prepare *all* teachers to work with diverse school populations?

The interview questions selected to probe for answers to the research questions included:

One. Why do you think students of color are not going into teaching?

Two. Why did you choose teaching as a career?

Three. Do you recommend teaching to others? Why, why not?

Four. Are teachers respected in your community? Has the image of teachers changed over time in your community?

Five. How can we attract and recruit more students of color into the field of teaching?

Six. What changes would you make in the teacher training experience to better prepare all teachers to work with students from diverse economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds?

The Results

The reasons why students of color are not entering the field of teaching are numerous and complex. The reasons provided by the interviews in the present research can be placed in the three categories developed from an extensive review of literature.

Educational Experience:

--not graduating from high school

--lack of preparation

--negative experience in school

--poor student discipline/lack of respect

--teachers not prepared for diversity

--lack of support in college

Cultural and Community Concerns:

--lack of academic encouragement

--racelessness

--absence of role models

--low status

--too much education for the return

--teaching not attractive to some ethnic groups

Social and Economic Obstacles:

--low pay

--negative image

--poor school conditions

--more opportunities elsewhere

--racism

Negative experiences in school were cited in a variety of ways as the most common educational reason that students of color were not selecting teaching as a career. These entailed lack of adequate academic preparation and poor counseling for students of color as well as lack of adequate preparation on the part of teachers to work with students from diverse backgrounds often resulting in students dropping out or being pushed out of the system. The most revealing finding, however, came under cultural and community concerns: students are being discouraged from entering the teaching profession on all sides. Students who are not academically successful are told that they cannot survive the rigors

of college. Lower-income students are either told that they cannot afford college or they are tracked into programs that match their parents' vocations. Middle-class children of color are told that they should strive for more than that teaching given that their chances of teaching in low status urban schools is great. Academically successful students of color are told that their opportunities are limitless, that colleges are waiting to recruit them. Parents who have struggled and perhaps not survived formal schooling steer their children away from education seeing it as the source of their present predicament. Parents who see education as an avenue out of poverty and low-status pressure their children to move into high status professions away from community and service occupations. Social and economic obstacles included low pay and the negative image that teachers have in our society. As was revealed in the interviews, how one defines "low pay" varies greatly. In the three school districts interviewed, teachers' income for a ten-month year exceeded the average worker's income of twelve months by $10,000.

Recommendations

Informants were not without hope in recommending ways to attract more students of color into the field of teaching and suggesting changes to teacher education

programs which would better prepare all teachers to work with students from diverse economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. The teachers of color interviewed contended that students of color could become interested in teaching as a career if: 1) they were given the opportunity to assist other youth academically in order to feel what it means to "make a difference in a child's life"; 2) K-12 education improved so that children of color viewed their experience positively; 3) parents were more engaged in their child's education; and 4) the image of teachers improved. Other suggestions included: encourage students, bring in role models, recruit in the community, increase the salary of teachers, and enhance financial aid options.

Recommendations for changes in teacher education programs in many ways were outgrowths of the previous suggestions on attracting students of color to the field; they centered on increased understanding and communication between teachers and students. To accomplish this, the majority of informants stated that teachers needed to be exposed to and engaged in diversity. In the context of teacher training this translated into placing future teachers in a variety of school and community settings early in their undergraduate experience and continuing throughout their college years. These "internships" were seen not only as

a way to acquaint future teachers with the broader ecology of the school but also to winnow out those who were not committed to the education of all children.

A second, and related, imperative stated the need for teachers to have an increased understanding of the range of pedagogical skills required to work effectively with diverse school populations as well as an increased understanding of the social, economic, and political realities of the profession. Informants suggested involving teachers, parents, and community people who currently work with diverse school populations in the training of future teachers as well as the educating of college faculty who have had little if any exposure to working with low-income youth or people of color.

Based on these suggestions, I developed a teacher education program designed to address diversity. The goal of the model is not simply to add more minorities to the teaching force, but to better train all teachers to work with a diverse student population. The recruitment goal, however, would be to have at least one-third students of color in the program. The reasons for this have been well-documented (Willie, 1981; Haberman, 1989); a critical mass is necessary for people to feel a comfort level in which they are willing to critique each other and expand on their own ideas. The program has three main components: general Arts and Science classes with

"teaching" sections and Ethnic Studies, a College of Education weekly seminar, and internships in schools and the community. One of the hallmarks of the program is that the cohort/seminar process would go on every quarter of the undergraduate experience. I contend that if we better prepare all teachers to work with diversity, more students of color will be able to make a choice about college, more will see schooling as a positive experience, and more may opt to remain in education and teach.

Conclusion

If this research has demonstrated anything, it is that we have been approaching the problem of the shortage of minority teachers from the wrong angle. The interviews demonstrated clearly that token representation on the part of minority individuals will not resolve inequity. Teachers of color are products of the same educational system as white teachers (Hale-Benson, 1982; Rist, 1970). Those that have made it into teaching have not only survived the system but have succeeded in it (Mercer, 1992). Most are middle class and have come from families removed from the realities of inner cities (Henry & Jackson, in Grant, 1989; Orebaugh, 1969; Montero-Sieburth, 1989; Kluckhohn, 1962). What is necessary is the improvement of the education of all

children so that they can choose their vocation in life. To do this all teachers must be better equipped to work with all children, as soon as possible. Since we have failed, and continue to fail, to provide the majority of our teachers with the skills to succeed in inner city schools, we search for a short cut, a quick answer, a placebo that will get us through the next few years: recruit minority teachers to work in the inner cities, to work with their own people. This assumes a great deal.

Minority individuals cannot be expected to assume professional positions which the dominant culture denigrates and undermines. Not until the dominant culture, in whatever form, comes to value teachers and takes responsibility for training all teachers to work with all children will we see an increase in interest by students of color in the field of teaching. Not until America alters its priorities and reinvests in its cities and youth is there reason to expect people of color to go into urban areas that have been devastated by crime and poverty due to racism, classism, and fear. Not until the entire teacher training process (selection, training, placement, on-going inservice) takes a turn in the direction of assuming serious responsibility for providing teachers with adequate education and training to work with children from diverse language, racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds can we expect people who

have been excluded and then marginalized by our educational system to come forward willingly to participate in a national enterprise to educate this country's youth. The problem with which we are confronted might be far greater than expected.

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